

# Liberalism On the Defensive

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A. M. Hunter in his little book, *The Message of the New Testament*, makes the following observation: "The Liberals are now fighting a defensive battle." As time goes by the truth of this assertion is becoming increasingly apparent. Nineteen-forty-seven saw a fresh clash of arms in this conflict.

Last year we noted our surprise at the large place given to conservatism at the 1946 annual meetings of the National Association of Biblical Instructors. At both the New York and Chicago sessions the keynote of the program was a plea for a return to orthodoxy. But a reaction set in immediately, as evidenced by the programs for the 1947 meetings. Professor Carl E. Purinton, the outgoing president, said these contained "a reaffirmation of faith in the viewpoint of liberalism."

The new president, Rolland E. Wolfe, professor at Western Reserve University, has expressed his opinions in no uncertain tones in an article entitled "The Terminology of Biblical Theology," in the July, 1947, issue of *The Journal of Bible and Religion*. We can only notice a few statements in this strongly worded diatribe. Here is a good sample:

Most of what we have known of biblical theology, even the dominant contemporary form which is the product of various so-called "neo" movements, is based on a biblical literalism which cannot serve this present day effectively. It blows as a stifling wind from antiquity and the middle ages. Someone has said that theology is the invention of the devil. It is apparent that there is much truth in this statement, when we consider the untruths which have been and are still perpetuated in the name of biblical theology.<sup>3</sup>

To one who asserts that in the latter part of the New Testament "the paganization of Christianity was already well under way,"<sup>8</sup> the Bible obviously has no divine authority. We are not surprised, therefore, to read this expressed opinion:

The emerging biblical theology of today in most instances reverts to the old doctrine of revelation. In this respect, it does a distinct disservice to the cause of religious understanding and the progress of biblical studies.<sup>4</sup>

Lest Professor Wolfe fail to make his position clear, he states very bluntly: "The Bible is not the word of God. It is the word of man, the word of man about God."<sup>5</sup>

It is very enlightening to get Dr. Wolfe's interpretation of the situation in the book of Job. He declares that Job was "the higher critic of his day," while his three friends were the biblical theologians of that time."<sup>6</sup>

Professor Wolfe definitely has "biblical theology" and "biblical theologians" on his mind. In an article of only five pages he uses the two expressions a total of twenty-four times, eleven times on the last page. At least this new movement in the direction of biblicism has been and is vigorous enough to stir up a powerful reaction.

The fundamental feature of the liberalism of such men as Professor Wolfe is its basic opposition to the supernatural. When put in the test tube it turns out to be nothing more nor less than a naturalistic humanism. This point of view is well illustrated in Wolfe's analysis of Moses' experience at the burning bush. He says: "The dialogue between God and Moses,

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Bible and Religion*, XV (July, 1947), p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

which followed the experience of the burning bush, was in reality a dialogue between his higher and lower self."<sup>7</sup>

The January, 1947 issue of *The Journal of Bible and Religion* contains an article by Thomas Kepler, who followed Clarence Tucker Craig as professor of New Testament at Oberlin. Kepler's article is headed: "Neo-modernism: Theological Pattern of Today and Tomorrow." This title at least suggests one thing and that is that the modernism of the early twentieth century has already been exchanged for a new and more up-to-date modernism.

The defensive attitude of liberalism today receives vivid illustration in the book *Religious Liberals Reply*, published by the Beacon Press, of Boston. In this anthology seven philosophers headed by Henry Nelson Wieman came rushing to the rescue of poor, belabored liberalism.

The Prefatory Note reveals the purpose of the book.

Liberalism, and especially religious liberalism, is under heavier fire today than at any time in more than a century. Being closely associated with organized religious liberalism, the publishers have been pressed to make available to the public, competent and scholarly replies to these attacks.<sup>8</sup>

The first four writers deal with neo-orthodoxy, and seek to point out its faults and failings. It is interesting to note that most of their attacks are leveled at Reinhold Niebuhr. This is due mainly to the fact that he is admittedly the keenest philosopher among neo-orthodox leaders in this country. Also he has been especially vocal, and his writings and utterances have received wide publicity in the secular as well as the religious press.

It is interesting to note Dr. Wieman's analysis of the place and value of neo-orthodoxy. He says:

Neo-Orthodoxy is a stage through which we had to pass to recover from a situation that might otherwise have been hopeless. It is like the fever of a diseased organism; it is a form of pathology, but if it does not continue too long or go too far

it enables the organism to throw off the poison infesting it and thereby return to normal health.<sup>9</sup>

The "poison" here referred to is defined in the next paragraph as the mixture of religious liberalism and fundamentalism that held the stage during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Those familiar at all with Dr. Wieman's 1946 volume, *The Source of Human Good*, will not be surprised at the thorough-going humanism reflected in the following statement:

According to the view of the present writer, the source of all things good is a kind of creative interchange between human individuals and groups, and between the organism and its environment.

Dr. Wieman's 'god' is a poor substitute for the God of the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To him the chronicle of the Christian God, like other biblical presentations, belongs in the category of myth. He writes:

Here is where Neo-Orthodoxy fails. Religious leaders and others who perpetuate the old myths while repudiating the knowledge now attainable concerning the creative source of human life and its values, and even denying that intellectual analysis of observed events can ever attain such knowledge, are blocking the way of our salvation.<sup>10</sup>

The second essay of the book *Religious Liberals Reply* is a review of Reinhold Niebuhr's two-volume work *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which was published in 1941 and 1943. The reviewer, Arthur E. Murphy, labels it "the mature reflections of one of the most courageous and penetrating of contemporary religious thinkers on the great themes of man and destiny, of sin and salvation."<sup>11</sup> At the same time he holds that:

Dr. Niebuhr's views on human nature are in essential respects unclear and misleading, that they contain a considerable fund of sound moral experience and practical wisdom refracted in the distorting medium of a radically incoherent dia-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Henry N. Wieman *et al*, *Religious Liberals Reply* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1947), p. v.

<sup>9</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

lectual theology.<sup>13</sup>

Gardner Williams, the third writer, is less respectful toward Niebuhr. He attributes a propaganda motive to the latter.

The desire to keep man feeling sinful and contrite all the time is related to ecclesiasticism. There are two ways of getting people to support ecclesiastical institutions. One is to make them feel sinful. The other is to teach important truths in church which intelligent people will be glad to find out about. Mr. Niebuhr leans heavily on the former method, even as did St. Augustine.<sup>14</sup>

Professor Williams recommends as the solution of our present day problems the humanism of the Unitarian Churches and the Ethical Culture Society.<sup>15</sup> That is the best he has to offer us.

The fourth writer, Jay William Hudson, devotes most of his time to a review of Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man*. His attitude is revealed in his characterization of neo-orthodoxy. He says: "Neo-Orthodoxy is Fundamentalism in a new spring dress. . . . She is a pleasant little Protestant Jesuit."<sup>16</sup>

There seems to be no place for God in the thinking of these philosophers. Man has to work out his own destiny without any higher help. This is the way Professor Hudson expresses it:

What man can become has been only gradually formulating itself through many ages. But the great thing is, it *has been formulating*. A "God" might have told us at once and for all. It would have saved us a lot of trouble. But he didn't. So, we have to work it out for ourselves.<sup>17</sup>

The scene of battle changes when we come to the fifth essay, written by Max C. Otto. Professor Otto has ridden bravely on to the field against Neo-Thomism. He

singles out as his most formidable opponent the French philosopher, Jacques Maritain. He scores some heavy blows on the Thomist philosophy. But his sharpest invectives are leveled at Monsignor Sheen and the Catholic efforts to dominate our educational system.

The sixth champion of humanistic liberalism is James B. Pratt. He is opposed utterly to all authoritarianism, except that of the human reason. He declares: "I am convinced that the New Supernaturalism and the old Fundamentalism are among the most insidious perils of twentieth-century Christianity."<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Pratt thinks of the Bible as:

A collection of ancient texts which, taken in their literal form . . . are in flagrant conflict with modern science and history, and which contain innumerable mutually conflicting assertions and sentiments and much that is downright immoral.<sup>19</sup>

The last writer, Roy Wood Sellars, pays compliment to the "high sincerity and ability of the Neo-Orthodox."<sup>20</sup> But he still cannot forgive them for rejecting naturalism.<sup>20</sup>

Two main impressions lingered with me as I finished reading this book. One was the utter emptiness of naturalistic, humanistic liberalism. Beneath the veneer of philosophical terminology the whole thing sounded superficial.

The second definite impression was that Barth and Brunner and Niebuhr cannot show us the King's highway. We owe much to them as pioneers who have pulled the pendulum across from naturalism to supernaturalism. But their extreme transcendentalism is almost deistic; and we must await the return of the pendulum to the golden mean of biblical truth.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.